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Enthusiasts Eye Assault Rifles as Ban Nears End

Report: Makers Taking Orders

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Gun manufacturers are gearing up for the scheduled expiration next week of a 10-year-old federal ban on assault weapons and are taking orders for semiautomatic rifles and high-capacity ammunition magazines that may soon become legal again, according to a report released yesterday.

The report by the Consumer Federation of America, which favors greater regulation of the gun industry, concludes that "assault weapons will be more lethal and less expensive" without the ban and argues that police "may be forced to adopt a more militaristic approach" as greater numbers of firearms flood the market.

The report, based on interviews with gun industry officials and on reviews of advertisements and other sales materials, comes in the waning days of a federal ban on semiautomatic assault rifles, which has been in place since 1994 but is set to expire Monday unless Congress intervenes.

The Senate approved a renewal of the ban earlier this year, but the provision was part of a broader bill that included other measures opposed by the White House. House GOP leaders have given little indication that they plan to back an extension of the ban, and President Bush -- who said during the 2000 campaign that he would support an extension -- has not pushed the issue.

White House spokeswoman Claire Buchan said that Bush "supports the reauthorization of the current assault weapons ban." She noted that "the president's views are well known" among GOP leaders in Congress.

The lack of action on Capitol Hill has prompted gun-control groups and others who favor the legislation to step up their appeals in recent days, including the purchase of full-page newspaper advertisements that criticize Bush for not acting. D.C. Police Chief Charles H. Ramsey and more than 70 other police officials will hold a rally today urging Bush to back an extension.

The National Rifle Association has responded by urging members to lobby against the extension of what the group refers to as "the Clinton gun ban." The measure was championed and signed into law by

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President Bill Clinton.

"We have come too far in the past 10 years not to pull out all the stops in the next week and a half to ensure this ban expires as Congress intended, and becomes nothing more than a sad footnote in America's history," the group said in a message posted on its Web site.

Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) left the campaign trail in May to vote in the Senate in favor of extending the ban, but he has also sought to highlight his familiarity with hunting and other shooting sports. "He is a gun owner and hunter himself, but he believes that a ban on these dangerous weapons must be extended," said Kerry spokeswoman Allison Dobson.

The NRA, a powerful lobbying group that strongly supported Bush in 2000, has not yet officially endorsed a presidential candidate, but it has been sharply critical of Kerry. Spokesman Andrew Arulanandam said that the NRA had been waiting until after both party conventions were over and that the group's board will discuss the issue at a meeting this weekend.

"I see an absence of political appetite for a gun-issue battle in an election year," Arulanandam said. "Politicians remember history, and they remember that a number of high-profile politicians lost their jobs as a result of this ban."

The 1994 law banned the sale to civilians of 19 types of semiautomatic weapons, including semiautomatic versions of the Intratec Tec-9 pistol and Uzi submachine gun, but many manufacturers have been able to skirt the prohibition by offering knock-off models.

The Consumer Federation's assessment cites examples of recent sales pitches by gun manufacturers, which have indicated that they plan to revive models and features outlawed by the ban. Beretta has been offering customers two free 15-round magazines after Sept. 14 with the purchase of two of its weapons, according to an advertisement. The current law restricts the capacity of ammunition magazines to 10 rounds. The consumer group said manufacturers, including Israel Military Industries Ltd., which makes Uzi brand submachine guns, are likely to introduce semiautomatic models into the U.S. market if the ban is lifted.

In another example cited by the group, Illinois-based ArmaLite Inc. has announced a program that allows buyers to convert their guns to use flash suppressors, bayonets and other features that are now illegal. The company is also allowing customers to order banned assault weapons now and have them shipped once the ban is lifted, according to the study.

One company advertisement notes that "ArmaLite rifles are made to be easily retrofitted with your new flash suppressor and other pre-ban features, so you don't have to wait if you choose an ArmaLite."

Robert A. Ricker, a former executive director of the American Shooting Sports Council who now serves as a consultant for groups that favor stricter gun controls, said gun manufacturers hope to capitalize on

fears that the ban could be reintroduced at any time.

"You're going to see an incredible buying frenzy," Ricker said during a conference call with reporters yesterday. "Fall is the prime buying season for guns. . . . I think the gun industry's mantra is going to be 'Buy your wife a high-capacity magazine while you can.' "

Arulanandam called such predictions exaggerated. He accused gun-control groups of seeking to confuse the distinction between semiautomatic weapons -- which are covered by the 1994 ban -- and automatic weapons, which are outlawed under other legislation and will continue to be illegal.

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